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ABSTRACT

In the early years of this century, Frank Aydelotte contributed to higher education by teaching at Indiana University and at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and by serving as President of Swarthmore. In 1908, Aydelotte accepted his first major academic position at Indiana University, after completing his education at Oxford, England. Here he developed his "thought approach" to teaching writing. Convinced that Indiana's Harvard-influenced freshman English course was less than effective, Aydelotte combined two courses, freshman writing and freshman survey, into a single course. In this course, students read a few seminal texts of a few seminal authors or essays, poetry or drama; discussed the ideas of those texts thoroughly in class; and wrote essays about the views of life expressed in these works. Working in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, Aydelotte considered significant literature to be that literature that offered solutions to central human problems. Such literature, to use Arnold's terms, offered criticism of life. When writing about this literature, students were not to summarize the texts but to compare the ideas expressed to the students' own ideas; in other words, students were to make ideas read and discussed part of their own mental makeup, part of their own world views. Aydelotte later developed a similar course at MIT, combining the teaching of writing with significant ideas related to engineering. Finally, at Swarthmore, he developed an honors program designed after his own education at Oxford. (TB)

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Frank Aydelotte and the Oxford Method of Teaching Writing in America

On June 5, 1933, Frank Aydelotte's face appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine as a tribute to his many significant contributions to American higher education. He was, in fact, near the height of his influence as an educator. As the American Secretary to the Rhodes Trust, he had been the driving force in making the Rhodes Scholarship the most prestigious academic scholarship that an American student could win. He also had been instrumental in establishing the distinguished Guggenheim Fellowships and in 1933 continued to serve as the organization's chair. And he was President of Swarthmore, a 500-student Quaker college that he had formed into one of the nation's best small liberal arts schools. He accomplished this by establishing Swarthmore's influential Honors Program, which he, with the help of the Swarthmore faculty, designed to stimulate bright students to work to their full potential free from the distractions of daily preparation for conventional classes. By 1933, the

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Swarthmore program had become the national model, and Aydelotte was widely recognized as the leading expert on honors education.

While Aydelotte has been recognized for his many accomplishments as am an administrator, he has not been widely recognized for his contributions to the development of English studies in the first half of the 20th century. Before accepting Swarthmore's presidency, he in fact was one of the most innovative English professors in the nation, developing ground-breaking courses and curriculums at Indiana University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before revamping Swarthmore's. He attempted to apply to all of his curriculums some of the methods that he had experienced as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford from 1905-07. These years convinced him that Oxford, "[w]ithout educational theorizing and without apparent design," had put in place educational methods that could be modified to meet educational needs under American conditions (*Lockstep* 20). My purpose in this book is to examine Aydelotte's contribution to English studies in America, especially his methods of teaching writing. First, I will examine the "thought approach" to freshman English that he developed at Indiana University beginning in 1906. This method, with its emphasis on teaching students to write by moving students toward original thought, was at the time one of the few alternatives to Harvard formalism, then the almost unchallenged approach to that composition.

Second, I will examine his contributions to the then new field of technical or engineering writing while he taught at MIT from 1915 to 1921. Finally, I will examine his contributions to honors education by concentrating on his approach to English studies at Swarthmore. While Aydelotte taught few English courses there because of his extensive duties both as president of the school and as the executive officer of the Rhodes and Guggenheim fellowships, the Department largely adopted his assumptions about teaching English literature and writing. All of these curriculums and courses were at the time of their development innovative, and many of them raise issues that are still important, even central, to current discussions about writing instruction. These issues include using writing response groups, peer evaluation, and writing-to-learn strategies. As a profession, we would do well to examine the methods that he developed. Aydelotte's tendency was always to design courses of study that challenged students to think seriously and deeply about issues central to the human condition. To his mind, this emphasis on thought should be the essence of all liberal studies. He therefore advocated using literature to comment on life rather than studying it for its aesthetics or its form or its history, all methods which should, in his view, be subordinated to using it to help students learn to think analytically. Likewise, writing instruction, which he thought should not be separated from careful reading of essays and other literature,

should de-emphasize questions of form and mechanics and concentrate on helping students to think through central issues of education and other fields. By placing emphasis on serious thought, Aydelotte helped raise the standards of American higher education at a time when college often had more to do with extracurricular activities, such as sports and fraternities, than with intellectual development. In English studies themselves, he questioned methods that emphasized what he considered superficialities and attempted to replace them with methods emphasizing substance and critical thinking.

My method is biographical because of the nature of Aydelotte as a thinker. He was not a wide reader who felt obligated to digest all that was written on educational issues. Instead, he believed strongly (and his curriculums were all based on this assumption) in reading a few centrally important books thoroughly and integrating the thought contained in them into one's personal views of the world. Many of his key ideas came from his immediate experience, the best example of this being the extent to which his educational theory grew from his personal observations of the Oxford method of undergraduate education and the reading of a few key Victorian educational theorists, most notably Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman. Once Aydelotte developed his position on education, he attempted to apply his theory to the particular educational problems that he confronted in his work. This problem-solving tendency of his thought caused

his major contributions to American education to be largely context specific in the sense that he worked out his methods in particular educational and social conditions. While his methods, once worked out at particular schools, could be usefully applied to other conditions and other places, they always began as Aydelotte's attempts to work out solutions to particular local problems. Hence, while my method examines Aydelotte's pedagogical theories within particular social and political contexts, my primary focus is always on Aydelotte's activities within these contexts to discover how his pedagogies grew out of them.

In 1905, Aydelotte began his most influential educational experience in his life when he took a Rhodes scholarship in the second class of Americans to receive this support. At Oxford University he took his B.Litt. in English literature while working with Sir Walter Raleigh, the school's first modern English Professor. Also at Oxford, he experienced a method of education based not on the American system of courses and credits but on the British method of mastering a small group of related subjects. Instead of taking courses, undergraduates met with tutors to study related subjects and to prepare for examinations in them at the end of their three years. Aydelotte himself studied English and history, and students who took the Modern Greats studied history, economics, and political science to give them the background to deal with contemporary social and

political problems. The tutor helped prepare reading lists in their subjects from which students read at their own pace, often doing the bulk of the reading during the long Oxford vacations. The only requirement of the academic year was that undergraduates met with their tutors once a week to present papers based on the reading. After listening to the paper, the tutor critiqued it for both content and expression. Aydelotte became convinced that combining instruction in a content area and writing was a more effective method of teaching writing than Harvard's, which segregated the teaching of literature and writing in specialized courses. Aydelotte also observed the Oxford distinction between pass and honors degrees and became convinced that the Oxford method allowed the brighter students to progress at their own pace without being forced into what he later called the "academic lockstep" of American colleges and universities. The honors degree also challenged the brightest students to strive to do their best work. American schools, Aydelotte was convinced, designed all courses to meet the needs of the average and therefore held back the exceptional students, either boring them or driving them into social activities of questionable worth (sports and fraternities, for instance) to fill their free time.

In 1908, about the time he took his Oxford degree, Aydelotte accepted his first major academic position, returning to IU as a Visiting Associate Professor of English. Chapter 3 examines the first course that he designed based on his experiences at Oxford,

English 2A. This course modified some of the principles he had experienced at Oxford to meet conditions at IU. Convinced that IU's Harvard-influenced freshman English course was less than effective, Aydelotte combined two courses, freshman writing and the freshman survey of English literature into a single course to create his 2A. In this course, students read a few seminal texts of a few seminal authors of essays, poetry, and drama; discussed the ideas of those texts thoroughly in class; and wrote essays about the views of life expressed in these works. Working in a general way in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, Aydelotte viewed significant literature as that literature that offered solutions to central human problems. Such literature, to use Arnold's term, offered criticisms of life. When writing about this literature, students were not to summarize the texts but to compare the ideas expressed in that work to the students' own ideas--in other words, students were to make the ideas read and discussed part of their own mental makeup, part of their own world views. Aydelotte therefore solved a central problem of many writing courses, what do students write about? They were to write not about personal experiences but about the ideas expressed in the reading. While the course was popular with students, and in fact competed successfully with the traditional freshman writing and survey courses that remained on the books, English 2A was not popular with powerful members of the faculty, some of whom, including the chair, had been Harvard trained. When Aydelotte

returned to Oxford to complete his third and final year as a Rhodes scholar in 1913, 2A was removed from the IU catalogue and Aydelotte was no longer allowed to teach on the freshman level. By this time, however, his method had become well known, especially in the Midwest, as the "thought approach" through a series of articles that he had published in academic journals and later collected in *The Oxford Stamp, and Other Essays*. In 1913, he published his major statement of the method, *College English*, which described his approach in great detail to both teachers and students.

Although some of the English faculty at IU did not see the value of the thought approach, other people did, especially the President of MIT, Richard Maclaurin, who hired Aydelotte in 1915 to revamp the Institute's English Department. Like Aydelotte, Maclaurin, a New Zealander, had been educated in the British system, and, like Aydelotte, was convinced that the Oxford system could be modified to meet American educational needs. At MIT, Aydelotte changed the emphasis of the MIT English offerings from Harvard formalism, with its separation of writing and literature instruction, to his thought approach, which unified the two. His most important contribution at MIT itself was to develop a new writing course for second semester freshmen that combined the study of seminal texts on the nature of engineering as a profession with the teaching of writing. A special form of the

thought approach, the course asked freshmen to reflect on a number of issues that Aydelotte considered central to engineering. These included engineering as a profession rather than a trade, engineering and liberal studies, engineering and literature, and engineering and the imagination. These readings and the issues that they raised Aydelotte designed to help create a broadly educated engineer who could hold his own socially and intellectually with a broadly-educated liberal arts graduate. The result of working through the problems of designing such a course led to Aydelotte's *English and Engineering* (2nd edition 1923), which appear to be the first anthology of essays in technical writing.

In 1921, he assumed the presidency of Swarthmore and began the development of his most influential curriculum, Swarthmore's famous Honors Program. In his Inaugural Address before the college, he outlined his educational creed--that American colleges and universities had done much to design a system that educates the average student but does little to educate the brighter. He recommended that Swarthmore begin working to solve this problem and to become a leader in American education. In *Breaking the Academic Lockstep*, his discussion of his honors program, Aydelotte tells of how, during his first few days on the job, he was working on various problems on hand for new

presidents when a group of faculty members dropped by to see him. They told him that they liked his ideas and wanted to know when they could start implementing them. Aydelotte immediately formed the necessary committees, two faculty members began that same year to test the seminar system for which Swarthmore became famous, and by the next academic year Swarthmore had its first two divisions of honors, English literature and the social sciences. During Aydelotte's first ten years, he coordinated the development of ten more divisions and made Swarthmore the leader in this field.

Aydelotte based Swarthmore's Honors Program on the Oxford method but adapted it to American conditions. Students spent their first two years studying fairly traditional introductory subjects. Exceptional students, however, had the option of using their second two years to study of honors. During these two years, students took a series of seminars, two a semester, in which they worked with a professor and a small group of fellow students (usually about five in all). The professor gave out a ready list for the semester's work and the students read the material. Since the seminars met just once a week, honors students had ample time to read the material on their own and then follow their interests in the material by doing additional reading on their own.

The main work of the seminar was to prepare regular papers on the readings. For each seminar meeting, professors assigned a

common body of reading. They then designed a series of paper topics that covered the major issues connected to the topic under discussion and assigned each student one issue to research in some depth. Students then prepared papers on their assigned areas and read these papers before the seminar, where the papers formed the basis of the day's discussion. Although different professors handled the papers differently, each paper was critiqued by students and the professor for both content and expression.

Aydelotte set up the seminars to give honors students as much freedom as possible to educate themselves. They did not have to attend regular classes or lectures, they did not have to prepare for weekly quizzes or for final examinations, and they did not have to work at a particular pace--they could pace themselves. However, they did, as their Oxford counterparts, have to prepare for comprehensive examinations at the end of their two years of honors work. These examinations consisted of two parts, writtens and orals, and they were graded not by Swarthmore professors but, again like at Oxford, by specialists in the area from other schools. On the writtens, students normally had to select two three-hour questions out of eight to ten and answer them in essay form. These questions were developed not by the Swarthmore teachers but by the outside examiners who based the questions on the seminar reading lists. After the writtens, students took an oral examination, again

given by the examiners. Based on the writtens and the orals, successful students received either honors, high honors, or highest honors.

As this brief description suggests, Aydelotte made writing central to honors work. By writing papers about the readings in the seminars, students used writing as a tool to synthesize the main ideas of the seminar's central texts and the important secondary research on them. When students presented the papers, these papers became the focus of discussions in which all participants, including the professor, critiqued the writing for both its content and its effectiveness. Professors required that weak papers be rewritten as needed. Students thereby gained extensive experience in those two years writing papers, having their papers critiqued, and critiquing the papers of their peers. The Swarthmore method therefore functioned as an early form of the response group. One element that made Aydelotte proud was that the critiques of the papers and the discussions of the topics raised in them continued beyond the seminars themselves into the student dorms, where the students held heated debates on important issues.

A second kind of writing that became central to the program was the written section of the comprehensive examination. To be successful on this, students had to write quickly and well to convince the external reader that they knew their material and could present it effectively. While such timed writing was a

special kind of writing, the experiences students gained from presenting papers that were critiqued by both students and professors probably helped prepare them to write under the gun.

Not surprisingly, given his suspicion of formal rhetoric, at the same time that Aydelotte oversaw the growth of the Honors Program with its emphasis on writing-to-learn, he also encouraged the dismantling of all formal writing courses at Swarthmore. The reasons for this change were complex, but they included the improvement in the preparation of the student body as Swarthmore's reputation for excellence grew; the replacement of writing courses with writing in content courses, including the honors seminars; and the belief at Swarthmore during this period that the college should not teach skills, including writing skills. While some indications exist suggesting that some Swarthmore students, even some honors students, did not write well, Aydelotte and the English Department handled these cases through what would now be called a writing center where faculty members could refer students for extra help.

Throughout his work as an educator, Aydelotte was convinced that the teaching of rhetoric apart from content harmed rather than helped students. The fundamental premise of his thought approach was that students would learn to write if they were first taught to think. Once they had something important to communicate, they would then be willing to work on their writing to bring it up to an acceptable level. Part of his suspicion of

rhetoric grew from the fact that he was not trained in it. He was familiar only with some of the 18th and 19th-century rhetoricians and with the Harvard approach with its emphasis on form and correctness. When he spoke of rhetoric, he almost always meant the formal methods popular at the time.

But while Aydelotte rejected explicit instruction in rhetoric, he did build rhetorical principles into his classes, especially at Swarthmore. While the thought courses at Indiana and MIT gave little direct instruction in rhetoric, the extensive reading and discussion of that reading that students did before they wrote their papers served a heuristic or inventional function. At Swarthmore, while students did not discuss theories of audience adaptation or rhetorical situations, they did have an actual audience for their papers, the other students in the seminar. Consequently, while students received little overt instruction in rhetoric, Aydelotte designed their courses so that they mastered rhetorical principles experientially.